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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to analyze and critique the major issues and methodology of Black family literature, noting trends and changes from the 1960's through 1975, emphasizing primarily issues and methodology of the 1970's. Finally, it points out implications of the current literature for future theory and research. (Author)

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Analysis and Critique of Black Family Literature

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Introduction

A Black family literature prior to the decade of the sixties hardly existed. In fact the major work of Black families prior to this period and up to the first half of it was Frazier's book, The Negro Family in the United States, 1939. This has most often been the work cited in the treatment of Black families in family sociology literature, especially, in support of the thesis that the Black family is deteriorating, a monolithic view. Thus, the most often cited portion of Frazier's work has been that of the matriarchal structure. But it is important to note that family sociologists have emphasized this to a much greater extent than Frazier did. It is correct to say that the matriarchy (both from standpoint of female-headed household and female dominance) has been overemphasized, while there has been a de-emphasis of intact families, the most prevalent type.

Moreover, most of the social science research on the Black family has not been studies of marriage and family among Blacks. Instead, the focus has included such units of analysis as race relations, social problems, social disorganization, poverty, etc. In other words, the Black family generally has been studied as an independent variable rather than as a dependent variable. Such is appropriate in these contexts, but it is inappropriate to use the findings from these studies as evidence of marriage and family among Black people.

Furthermore, most studies on Black families have utilized sources of pathological data, i.e. social case work records, court and psychiatric records, and typically low-income, non-working Black populations, surviving under extraordinary conditions of poverty, deprivation, and oppression. Therefore, it is no surprise that the most common image of the Black family

is pathology or weakness. But even living under such extreme pathological conditions, many are surviving. Hence it appears that these families have developed extraordinary resiliency--that they have survived at all is remarkable. This fact alone is evidence of fortitude.

Trends and Changes from 60's to 70's

The sixties represent the beginning of a new development in family literature, an accelerated interest in the study of Black families, a trend which continued in the seventies. This interest has transcended the boundaries of family sociology and has become of interest to the public in general and to Blacks in particular. Much of Black family theory and research has grown out of controversy, especially that which was motivated by what is commonly called the "Moyhihan Report (1965). Moreover, some of this theory and research may be characterized as transcending the boundary of family pathology or disorganization, which has been so firmly established in the social sciences, particularly in family sociology. In fact, Black family was almost synonymous with pathology, disorganization, deviance, etc. So Moyhihan made public what was already quite explicit in the halls of academia.

During this new development in Black family literature, the Black family has attained a legitimate, but separate place in sociology of the family Even with the increasing number of studies, few of them are reflected in marriage and family or family textbooks. Textbooks published since the heightened interest in the study of Black families may be summarized as follows: (1) continued emphasis of the matriarchal family, (2) reflections of new knowledge, treated separate or integrated throughout. Most of the textbooks published in the seventies seem to reflect the former, with fewer reflecting the latter. Moreover, for those textbook reflecting the latter,

the Black family is most often treated as a separate section or topic rather than as an integrated part.

First, we shall review selected works of Black families which tend to show the trends and changes from the sixties through the seventies. Secondly, attention shall be given to issues and methodology which seem to be most characteristic of the seventies. Finally, the Black family literature will be assessed on the basis of its implications for Black family theory and research.

As one reviews the Black family literature of the sixties, there emerges the beginning of a trend never before detected, a more positive image of Black families. This trend is only in its embryonic stage of development, since much of the literature is still dominated by a more negative image. Thus, two major images prevail, the first of which is characterized as negative: lower-class, matriarchal, pathological or weak. The second image which is more positive views the Black family as a strong and resilient system.

Functional analysis has been the dominant theoretical framework utilized in analyzing the Black family. Hence, the focus has been that of structural forms, and the form which has received most attention in traditional family literature is the matriarchy. This structure probably was first noted by Frazier (1939), after which, it became a common characterization of Black families. Even though the matriarchy was just one of the family structures observed by Frazier, his predecessors have used it incessantly when describing the Black family. Hence, the Black family image as protrayed in the social sciences was monolithic.

The monolithic view of Black families, the matriarch, is conceived as a deviant family structure. One of the underlying assumptions is that

such a structure can not provide the necessary functions for its maintenance. This assumption is largely based on the fact that the nuclear family, and more specifically the white middle class nuclear family is the normative family structure in our society. Notwithstanding this assumption, it may be argued that the female-headed family (commonly called matriarch) is an adaptation to the larger society--to conditions of racism and oppression which give rise to this family structure. Furthermore, it is argued that the female-headed household is more functional than dysfunctional; it has helped to solidify the family against breakdown or dissolution. It is largely the female who keeps the family intact even when the marriage dissolves.

Additionally, Ira Reiss's universal definition of the family provides a conceptual framework for understanding the functional importance of the female-headed family. The definition follows: "The family institution is a small kinship structured group with the key function of nurturant socialization of the new born" (c.f. in J. Ishelman, 1969, p. 48). This definition specifies one function which can be achieved by any kinship group. Therefore, since mother and child are a kinship group, the assumption is that the female-headed family is as capable as the nuclear family in achieving nurturant socialization. This assumption seems especially correct in light of the fact that, even in the nuclear family, the mother is the main source of nurturant socialization.

Probably the most widely known study in the sixties to apply functional analysis is the "Moyhihan Report" (1965). Moyhihan uses divorce, separation, and desertion as indicators of family breakdown--resulting in more female-headed families. He, like most social scientists, analyzing family stability or family breakdown, equates family stability with marital

stability. Marital instability may lead to family instability. But conceivable, a stable family unit can exist in spite of marital dissolution. In fact, I would suggest that this is most often the case in Black families experiencing marital dissolution. To assume, on the basis of functional analysis that the Black family is deteriorating because of the increasing number of female-headed families is unfounded without some knowledge of the dynamics which transcend the structure. And in fact as pointed out by Herzog (1966) there has been no substantial change in Black family structure during the past two decades. Then there are no grounds for claiming that a new pathology has emerged creating a degenerate process within the family as well as within the Black community.

Even though functional analysis has generally yielded a negative image of Black families, this is not inevitable. Evidence of this is found in Billingsley, Black Families in White America, 1968. This theoretical work, like Moyhihan's study, is an example of macro-analysis of the Black family. Through a functional approach, by analyzing the family as a social system, Billingsley derived three categories of families, of which twelve structures were specified. He also specifies three family functions. Support for all of three family types and functions have been supported by William and Stockton (1973). Billingsley's work is the first major attempt on the part of a social scientist to develop a theoretical orientation which emphasizes a range of variability among Black families. This works portrays the family as a strong and resilient institution, one which has managed to survive under conditions of racism and oppression.

Even though Staples (1970) criticizes Billingsley for his structural approach, for not penetrating the interior of Black families, the theory is quite amenable to doing so for one pursuing empirical research.

The Blood and Wolfe study (1960), which predates the "Moyhihan Report," employes a more dynamic approach to studying the family. The main purpose of the study was to find out what factors determine how husbands and wives interact and what effects did varying interaction patterns have on the spouses and the family as a unit. Some of the findings were that Black marriages when compared to whites were female-dominant, less satisfactory, encountered more stresses, and were less companionable. The most frequently cited finding from this study relative to Black families is female-dominance. Even though the study has been criticized methodologically, social scientistsseem to consider this finding definitive.

Further, the Blood and Wolfe study was a comparison of Black and White female. This study,as most comparative studies,seems to establish the white family as the norm and any aberrationof Black families from this norm cast them in a negative light. Thus, basically the study pointed out ways in which Black families differed from white families.

A study by Rainwater (1966) is an analysis of the dynamic processes which take place within lower-class Black families. It is an attempt to provide an indepth analysis of the family role in the "tangle of pathology." This is supported by the fact that he attributes Black family disorganization to enslavement and racist oppression, but at the same time he views Black family life itself as a major factor in sustaining and perpetuating the oppressive conditions under which Black Americans are forced to live (Rainwater, 1966).

Furthermore, Rainwater views Black family life and racial oppression as operating interdependently in producing a sequential development of family stages in the Afro-American slum community. These sequential stages are seen as having negative consequences for the members of families who

experience them (Rainwater, 1966).

Rainwater, as most social scientists in studying Black families, is guilty of middle-class bias. This is evidence in his view of the sequential stages or family forms as unhealthy or destructive to human potential. A more realistic view is that these are adaptations for survival under conditions of racist oppression. But when employing a white middle class norm as a frame of reference, Rainwater's view is inevitable.

Another critical point relates to the methodological technique used in collecting the data. Participant observation and opened ended interviews were used. These are techniques which are most vulnerable to the researcher's subjective bias. Such bias is even more suspect of a white sociologist who characterizes Black lower class families as pathological or disorganized.

Another work, Bernard, Marriage and Family Among Negroes, 1966 was the first major work published on Black families, following the "Moyhihan Report." This study does not focus on any particular theoretical approach, but is an attempt to amass available information in presentings a more general and positive view of Black families. From the beginning Bernard avoids the usage of conceptssuch as disorganization, anomie, and alienation. But she too is a victim of middle class bias. She analyzes the family, using a subculture framework. Two cultural strands are delineated for understanding Black family life. These two cultural strands refer to the degree to which the individual has internalized the moral norms of Western society as these exist within the United States. One strand is the "acculturated," which implies that the norms have become an intrinic part of the personality. It is often considered the "respectable strand. The other strand is known as the "externally adapted." For this group the norms are superficially adhered and not a matter of internal conviction. It is

variously referred to as the "masses," "low life," and the "nonrespectable" strand (Bernard, 1966).

This conceptual analysis is a limited view of Black family life. In fact it is another example of analyzing Black families in relation to external social forces without giving consideration to the internal forces which are most critical in understanding the unique patterns of Black family life. Thus, the unit of analysis is acculturation rather than Black families.

On the basis of Black family literature of the sixties, there is little evidence of any improvements in Black family theory and research. The relics still exist. Billingsley's work is the best example of an improvement in the theory and research of Black families. He recognizes the family as a system of diversity and complexity which may be viewed as adaptations to and reflections of the wider society.

Methodology and Issues of the 1970's

The seventies are more characteristic of improvements in Black family theory and research than the sixties. The Black families literature of this period represents greater efforts of social scientists to study the dynamics of Black family life. Moreover, the results seem to suggest greater efforts in analyzing family strengths rather than weaknesses.

The Black family literature to be reviewed here deal with three main issues: functional family strengths, family relations, and cooperative domestic exchange. A study which represerts functional family strengths is Hill's work, The Strengths of Black Families, 1971. This is an analysis of Black family strengths which have been functional for their survival, development, and stability. The strengths are as follows: strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, strong achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation. A systematic

assessment was made of the functioning patterns of different family structures. This precluded any prejudgement as to their adequacy (Hill, 1971).

Because of strong kinship bonds, Black families have absorped both minors and the elderly. Otherwise, most of these individuals might end up in foster homes or rest homes. This practice has been especially critical for minors in that Black children are much less easy to be adopted than white children.

The strong work orientation has been very functional for the survival and stability of the family. In the majority of Black families wives work in order to supplement the family's income. But in an overwhelming majority of Black families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, the husband assumes the primary responsibility of breadwinner (Hill, 1971).

In assessing the adaptability of roles Hill points to sources of strength in two parent families and in one-parent families. The flexibility of roles helps in maintaining a stable family even when the marriage breaks down.

Achievement orientation exists among both low-income families and high-income families. The fact that the majority of college educated Blacks come from low-income family helps to attest to this. A study by Hindelang (1970) showed that Black parents had higher educational aspirations for their children than whites (Hill, 1971).

The fact that Black parents tend to have high educational aspirations for their children is often viewed as unrealistic. If high aspirations for children are unrealistic, it is mainly because the means for educational goal attainment have not been, for Blacks, a true representation of the "American Dream."

Probably, the most comprehensive study of the Black family published in the seventies (up to this point) is, The Black Family in Modern Society by John Scanzoni (1971). The major objective of the study was to examine Frazier's premise that "there was an inextricable link between economic resources and Black family structure" (Ibid., viii). On the basis of this premise the author examines patterns of family structure and interaction among the majority of the Black population in America, hitherto overlooked. This population is composed of intact families.

The study is based on a kind of quasi-three generational model which includes the following: (1) a discreption and analysis of the relationships which husbands and wives experienced with their parents and other adults while they were adolescents, (2) an examination of linkages between background experiences and the current social and economic positions of husbands and wives. Concomitantly, in the context of their socioeconomic status, a rather detail examination is made of processes of husband-wife interaction, and (3) an examination of ways in which the parents are socializing their children to participate in the opportunity structure of our society (Scanzoni, 1971).

Structural background factors such as an urban experience, economic and status advantages provided (usually) through a father or father-substitute, who is a steady provider, and factors associated with status, i.e., religious involvement and household composition combine to form a kind of "syndrome of advantage" for couples in maintaining an ongoing family unit. These factors have an impact on the level of rewards that the family of procreation is able to provide for its offsprings (parental functionality). Furthermore, parental functionality as a reward stimulates identification as a reward to parents, a process which takes place within the complexities of reciprocal

interaction between parent and children.

In analyzing husband-wife relations the basis proposition was that husband-wife relations are inextricably linked to the family's position in the economic-opportunity structure. Thus, many similarities were found with what is known about white families located at comparable status levels. As stated by Scanzoni, "the clear, "drift" or trend within Black family structure is toward convergence with family patterns existing in the dominant society" (Ibid., p. 264). Even though some differences between Black and white families were observed, they were much less than the similarities.

The data concerning parent-child relations generally show that parents hold high aspirations and expectations for children attainments. Furthermore, these parents use means common to the dominant society. These children are likely to exceed their parents socially and economically, yet, there are no strong indications of closing the gap between Blacks and whites who are above the underclass.

Scanzoni's study provides broad insights into Black family life above the underclass. The study represents an effort to identity positive aspects of family life. And just as important as this is the fact that the study suggests system-blame rather than victim-blame for those ways in which Black families diverge from white families. Moreover, this research is an analysis of Black families rather than a comparative study of Black and white families, an approach which is more amenable to positive results.

A study, Marital and Family Relations of Black Women by Essie Rutledge, 1974 shows that Black married women are satisfied with their marriages, that no serious marital stresses are encountered, and that their marriages seem quite stable. Furthermore, these women feel quite adequate as parents and they highly value child rearing goals prevalent in the dominant society.

Overall, the research shows that the respondents, according to their perceptions, are members of families that possess substantially more strengths than weaknesses.

Studies by both Scanzoni (1971) and Rutledge have focused on family above, what Scanzoni refers as, underclass. But a study by Carol Stack (1972) investigates family life of families in poverty, most of who receive public assistance. Stack conducted a rather intensive field study of these families. The unit of analysis was the domestic network. The domestic network is a kinship structure which is composed of a core of kinsmen and/or close friends who cooperate on a daily basis; they either live near each other or co-reside. Authority over the household is held by the eldest person who is often a woman. More important than authority is maximizing relationships in the domestic network--helps to account for the family life of the urban poor more adequately than concepts of nuclear or matrifocal family. This is especially true in light of their limited economic resources. Thus, when such resources are greatly limited, people need help from as many people as possible. This requires expanding the kinship network.

Stack has made an effort to study urban poor Black families without prejudgements based on stereotypes. Otherwise, she could have ended up reinforcing such sterotypes as "matriarchy" and family pathology or disorganization. This study suggests new knowledge about family life of urban poor Black families. Moreover, it suggest some hypothesis that could be tested by a more systematic research design.

Implications for Theory and Research

After reviewing Black family literature, certain considerations regarding theory and research seem appropriate in order to provide a more realistic understanding of Black family life. Hence, the following are

suggested implications:

1. More considerations of various family structures and functions--avoid imputing white middle class family norms to Blacks as if they are "sacred". This gives recognition to the fact that Blacks may of necessity adopt family structures and functions which enable them to survive in a racist oppressive society--a parellel which is non-existent in the dominant society. This suggests a subcultural focus.
2. More consideration of the impact of the economic system on the family. Since economic rewards are outside of family control, but yet, effects the family system, it needs to be seriously considered--a focus on system--blame rather that victim--blame since the latter is already replete in the theory and research of the Black family.
3. Greater focus on the functions of primary family relations. Since economic rewards are more difficult for Blacks to receive than for whites to receive, it may be that the expressive gratifications received in the family are important sources of family strengths.
4. More consideration to investigating the dynamics of Black family, which tells more about the realities of family life than a structural analysis.
5. Study Black families on their own merit rather than comparing them with white families. The most comparative studies yield is differences between Blacks and whites--this is expected given differences of social and economic equalities. Hence, if the purpose of research on Black families is to understand family life, let us study Black families.

Summary

This paper has been an attempt to review Black family literature from

the 1960's to the present. The purpose was to show trends and changes during this period and to point out some of its implications. In sum, the Black family literature of the sixties basically followed the trends of the traditional views held regarding Black families i.e., disorganization, pathology, matriarchy, etc. There were only a few exceptions to this view. The greatest breakthrough came with the advent of Billingsley's book, Black Families in White America, 1969. The seventies have been the most prolific period of Black family literature which transcends the pathology model. The research has provided greater knowledge about Black family life. Moreover, it suggests some useful insights for conducting more valid research.

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